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COVID-19 RISK COMMUNICATION STRATEGY FOR REQUIRED PROTECTIVE MEASURES

For use within the COVID-19 Communication Taskforce

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The information provided is designed to deliver subject matter expert recommendations on the risk communication approach regarding the required protective measure of COVID-19 vaccination for all DOD personnel (Active Duty and Civilian) as of 23 August 2021. The recommendations provided are intended for use by the COVID-19 Communication Task Force in campaigns and products. For questions about the risk communication proposals in this document, please contact the U.S. Army Public Health Center (APHC) Health Risk Communication Division (HRCDD).

Table of Contents

	Page
Best Risk Communication Practices for Vaccine Directives	3
Risk Communication Principles and Theories	3
Recommended Best Practices	4
Lines of Effort for Effective Risk Communication Dialogue on Mandatory Vaccines	6
Lines of Effort Ideas for COVID Communication Strategy	6
Communication Channel Strategies for Awareness	8
Resources and Channels for Trends and Perceptions	8
Channel Application Tools	8
Conclusions drawn from Articles and Resources	10
Articles and Resources	11

Best Risk Communication Practices for Required Protective Measures

Risk Communication Principles and Theories

Effective risk communication on vaccine directives and administration requires the alignment of complex factors. These include trust between the communicator and the stakeholder(s), stakeholder involvement, and emotional responses to risk. Risk communication is the “process of exchanging information among interested parties about the nature, magnitude, significance, or control of a risk.” Once a required protective measure is put in place, intense emotional states can lead to a wide variety of public responses.¹ In this case, it is necessary to strengthen the risk communication component of messaging and campaign efforts to provide the stakeholder with all of the essential information about the immunization process.

Unvaccinated DOD Service members and Civilians will be the target stakeholders once COVID-19 vaccination is required. These stakeholders may be skeptical, fearful, angry, and/or confused. Risk communication provides a two-way dialogue between leaders and subject matter experts and their target stakeholders so that the correct target stakeholders receive accurate information.

In addition to the risk communication techniques that have demonstrated success in public health interventions, an informal literature review highlighted methods of public health communication, which provide further insight for a COVID-19 communication strategy. The Army leadership heavily weighs Army force protection against the risks of public health interventions, which is shown throughout the history of required protective measures. This analysis is often not described effectively enough to fully impact the public’s behavior or opinion. The analysis of previous public health campaigns shows the need to educate and communicate with the entirety of the DOD workforce.

¹ Covello, Vincent T. The EPA’s Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 1988. www.epa.gov/cdcynergy/erc/Content/activeinformation/resources/EPA_Seven_Cardinal_Rules.pdf

Recommended Best Practices

1) **Have an informed plan** – Know what you want to achieve and how you will do it before beginning your efforts. **Techniques include to—**

- **Have a clear goal of communicating expectations and consequences.**
 - Deliver the right message.
 - Know who else is talking to your stakeholders.
 - Be consistent.

2) **Speak to the Stakeholder Interests, not your own** –Connecting with the values and concerns of your stakeholders will help you improve your communication efforts.

“Four of the primary negative emotions in risk are anger, sadness, fright and anxiety.”²

Techniques include to—

- Be familiar with stakeholder concerns, fears, or issues related to the policy.
- Ask stakeholders what they know and think about the vaccine and listen to them, meet them where they are, understand their position, and talk with them about their concerns.
- Note any confusion about the policy or expectations/consequences.
- Build trust by listening; refrain from approaching the conversation as a debate.

3) **Explain the known risks of not getting vaccinated.** Techniques include to—

- **Start with the impacts and paint an evidence-based picture of what impacts will be to them,** their family, their community, and the military (e.g., continued community spread, potential severe illness, hospitalization, death, potential spread to those most vulnerable, potential inability to travel, reduced temporary duty (TDY) opportunities, perhaps **penalties/discipline**).
- Be honest and open about what you do not know.
- Avoid scare tactics and threats.
- Avoid comparisons to other vaccines.
- Focus on messages, which note that vaccines protect the entire force to enable continued mission success across the globe.
- Highlight unique exposure possibilities due to the nature of the worldwide DOD mission (e.g., deployment missions, training exercises, TDY requirements, CONUS/OCONUS locations with moderate to high transmission).
- Medical information should be explained to the stakeholders, which—
 - Focuses on increasing trust in the vaccine.

² Cone, Joe. Hold that Thought! Questioning Five Common Assumptions about Communicating with the Public. Oregon Sea Grant, 2008.

www.vims.edu/research/units/centerspartners/map/climate/docs_climate/HoldThatThought.pdf

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COVID-19 Risk Communication Strategy for Required Protective Measures

- Highlights the science of the vaccination process and how it works.
- Describes normal and expected side effects.

4) **Work with Trusted Sources.** Techniques include to—

- Know who your stakeholder listens to and find the leaders and vaccinated role models they trust.
- Establish a partnership with these trusted sources and invite them to participate in the discussion opportunities/dialogues.
- Work together to share consistent information.
- Assemble subject matter experts who can provide assistance and answers regarding Command responsibility for non-compliance, medical/health benefits of the required protective measure, and legal issues or concerns surrounding the requirement.

5) **Use Multiple Ways to Communicate.** Techniques include to—

- Deliver the messages and conduct the discussion in a way your stakeholders like to receive this type of information.
- Stakeholders will need to hear the message multiple times, so use multiple formats to improve your chances of reaching the stakeholder.
- Be certain to consider educational and cultural relevance.

Lines of Effort for Effective Risk Communication Dialogue on Mandatory Vaccines

Recommended Lines of Effort

1) Provide opportunities for discussion and dialogue using key messages and techniques.

- Town Halls:
 - Invite those who are interested in the information related to the requirement and the policy.
- Small group discussions:
 - Engage at the company, or squad level.
- One-on-one dialogue:
 - Announce times for open one-on-one discussions or office visits with leaders.
 - Helpful for those who may wish to have more privacy to discuss.

2) Develop key messages to use while engaging with target stakeholders - support discussion on the safety and prevention culture in the DOD.

Purpose of Key Message:

- The Army has a culture of safety and risk assessments that weigh all options for protection.
- The Army requires protective measures for Service members in all aspects of the mission (i.e., Kevlar, armor, hearing protection).
- The Army mission is global, and safety and protection measures for deployment and TDY include various prevention strategies, training and applications.
- Service members will be less likely to get severely ill, be hospitalized or die from the COVID-19 virus if they are vaccinated.
- Service members will be better protected when working in high transmission locations.
- More than 1.2 million Service members around the world have already received at least one dose of the COVID 19 vaccine³, supporting a safe and effective response to the virus.

Key Messages and Preparations:

- Format:
 - No more than three key messages per opportunity of discussion.

³ DoD News. DOD VACCINATION ADMINISTRATION TO DOD POPULATION. Coronavirus: DOD Response, 2021. <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/Spotlight/Coronavirus-DOD-Response/>

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COVID-19 Risk Communication Strategy for Required Protective Measures

- Create message, then pretest the message with colleagues and experts.
 - Prepare for anticipated questions, concerns, and doubts (<https://health.mil/Reference-Center/Frequently-Asked-Questions?query=covid&isDateRange=0&broadVector=000&newsVector=0000000&refVector=000000100000000&refSrc=1>; <https://www.opm.gov/faqs/topic/pandemic/index.aspx?fid=10260ea7-b31e-4227-b0e4-94d4804b2c8a>).
- Type:
 - Educational:
 - Protection from exposure both CONUS/OCONUS.
 - Protection of family, friends, community.
 - Protection of populations who cannot be vaccinated.
 - Informational:
 - Benefits of getting vaccine.
 - Clinical trials for vaccine demonstrate that vaccination reduces critical illness, hospitalization, and death from COVID-19.
- Resources:
 - Trusted Partner sources:
 - Coordinated with trusted sources and POCs.
 - Medical POC.
 - Chaplain.
 - Leadership, chain of command.
 - Legal/ Jag.

3) Execution of Opportunities for Engagement—Host Opportunity for Discussion.

Regardless of the duration of the discussions or dialogue, be consistent with the key message and resources.

- Be sure to engage in discussion that can fill knowledge gaps related to the current key messages and talking points.
- Be certain to provide time to answer questions related to command responsibilities.
- Provide clear policy information, expectations, benefits, and consequences (e.g., timeline, locations, and reporting processes). Be honest.

Communication Channel Strategies for Awareness

Resources and Channels for Trends and Perceptions

Social Media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram):

- Watch for comments and how often a post was shared. This may provide insight regarding how local stakeholders are feeling and what their concerns may be.
- Look out for questions that stakeholder's post (these can be sources of misconceptions or credible information).
- Which social media items are the most popular? Using the media that has the most viewers will reach more stakeholders.

News Media:

- What places do Service members normally turn to for news? What misconceptions are being reported?
- News media have an agenda that is separate from the Army mission (but not necessarily always in opposition).

Note: Although the below are not official Army resources or accounts, they do provide insight and trends related to the community perceptions.

LinkedIn:

- Gives good insight into the workforce groupthink that can happen in communities. Recommend searching key topics to see what conversations come up in the local area.

Reddit:

- Reddit can be a minefield of misinformation, but will demonstrate what misconceptions are being spread through local communities.

Google Analytics:

- While an unusual tactic, Google analytics can give the communicator an idea of the metrics around a sensationalized topic. A communicator can find the trending words, posts, images, and graphs for the time period of interest in a local area, as well as find what data people are searching for the most.

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COVID-19 Risk Communication Strategy for Required Protective Measures

Channel Application Tools

Once trends and community perceptions are gathered, the below communication channels can be used as tools and leveraged to communicate with the target stakeholders.

Push Media:

- Know which parts of the installation are most frequented and who frequents these places to push the best announcements in the most effective ways.
- Push announcements and notifications are not dialogue; these are best used to deliver a short notice to the public. These include:
 - Memorandum (announce town halls or discussion).
 - Emails, posters, and flyers (short announcements).

Official Social Media:

- Sprinklr (use with social media accounts/posts to highlight which posts/accounts are most successful/effective at delivering messages).
- Twitter, Facebook, Instagram (share infographics, announcements, policy updates).

Conclusions drawn from Articles and Resources

Throughout its history, the Army has strived to ensure that Service members and Civilians have access to all necessary safety and protection measures available. Additionally, the Army has weighed the risks and benefits of protective measures and public health when developing policy and guidance for the Force. While Service members and Civilians are often exposed to disease while performing missions across the globe, they can also carry those diseases back home to their families and communities. Accordingly, it is critical to protect the health of personnel and their loved ones through policy and mitigation strategies.

COVID-19 poses a serious health risk to Service members, Civilians, their Families, communities, and the Army as a whole. Service members and Civilians take protective measures every day to protect themselves and others from health threats—the COVID-19 vaccine is one more measure in a long line of others that have supported the health and safety of the Force.

Despite strong evidence that the COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective, significant numbers of the DOD population remain hesitant to get the vaccine. Some Service members and Civilians have expressed concern over the safety and efficacy of available COVID-19 vaccines. Many of their concerns reveal legitimate risk vs. benefit fears that stem from the history of vaccines. These concerns include but are not limited to fertility and pregnancy, side effects, and unknown long-term adverse health outcomes. Individuals with these concerns need the opportunity to speak with a qualified and trusted medical source. Additionally, there are individuals who have received a great deal of misinformation or subscribe to cultural or political views that are hard to unseat, even when provided factual information. As such, there will be a population within the DOD who will not be receptive to communication efforts, as well as a small percentage of the DOD workforce who will resist the requirement and may choose to leave their current positions.

Service Members and Civilians must ultimately accept the consequences of their decision if they choose not to comply with immunization requirements. Individuals can make their own informed risk vs. benefit decision in regards to this vaccination program and their decision will impact their subsequent behaviors and associated outcomes (i.e., to receive vaccine or refuse vaccine and incur any resulting disciplinary or other administrative actions). It is APHC's responsibility to provide facts in a credible and compassionate manner, to address stakeholder concerns and questions, and to remain honest and transparent in outlining requirements and reasons supporting those requirements.

Articles and Resources

<https://www.milsuite.mil/book/groups/army-public-health-centers-medical-threat-briefings/pages/covid-19>

APHC Public Health Assessment Division, Health Promotion and Wellness Directorate (August 2021). COVID-19 Vaccination Perceptions and Messaging Formative Evaluation briefing slides.

https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7025e2.htm?s_cid=mm7025e2_x

CDC conducted nationally representative household panel surveys during March–May 2021, to examine attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccination and vaccination intent among young adults. Results showed nearly one fourth of those aged 18–39 years were probably going to be vaccinated or were unsure about whether to be vaccinated, and nearly one fourth reported that they would probably not or would definitely not be vaccinated.

<https://www.defensenews.com/news/your-army/2021/06/17/the-shadow-of-anthrax-the-voluntary-covid-19-vaccination-effort-owes-much-to-past-failures/>

The handling of the anthrax vaccine becoming mandatory was arguably institutionally damaging to the trust of the soldiers in the healthcare interventions, and thus the voluntary option of the COVID-19 vaccine might be the most effective way forward.

https://www.health.mil/-/media/Images/MHS/Infographics/TRICARE-COVID-19-Vaccine-Toolkit/TRICARE-Communications_Vaccine-Confidence_Graphic_Vaccines-Save-Lives_Final.ashx

History proves that vaccine side effects do not compare to the symptoms of the diseases that vaccines protect against.

<https://health.mil/News/Articles/2021/02/01/DOD-experts-explain-The-science-behind-the-COVID-19-vaccines>

DOD experts explain the medical and scientific features behind the COVID-19 vaccines.

<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/military-make-covid-19-vaccine-mandatory/story?id=78689440>

Nearly 70% of all military personnel have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, but there has discussion about whether the Pentagon should make vaccinations mandatory for the ranks should the Food and Drug Administration formally approve the vaccine in the future in order to get more of the population vaccinated.

<https://www.armytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2021/07/01/prepare-for-mandatory-covid-vaccines-in-september-army-tells-commands/>

While COVID-19 vaccinations in the U.S. military are taking place under the same emergency use authorization that has allowed vaccinations to take place in the general

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COVID-19 Risk Communication Strategy for Required Protective Measures

population, Pentagon officials have said publicly that they would make the vaccinations mandatory, as is done with more than a dozen other vaccines, should the FDA formally approve the vaccine.

<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2021/07/06/military-weighing-mandatory-covid-19-vaccine-after-full-fda-approval/>

Article discusses the pros and cons of mandatory vaccines after FDA approval of the COVID-19 licensure that is expected soon.

[Review of Disease Intervention Approaches Marble Pandemics.docx](#)

An essay on the development of disease interventions that have been both effective and ineffective during the history of the Army.

<https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2021-07-26/medical-groups-call-for-vaccine-mandate-for-health-care-workers>

More than 50 medical groups issued a joint statement on Monday calling for health care and long-term care employers to mandate COVID-19 vaccinations for employees. Signatories of the statement include major health care groups such as American Medical Association, the American College of Physicians, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Public Health Association.

<https://www.wfxtv.com/news/health/coronavirus/when-will-covid-vaccines-get-full-fda-approval/>

The FDA granted priority review status to Pfizer's COVID vaccine application—for use in people 16 and older—on July 16, giving 6 months to review Pfizer's clinical trial information. Approval could be held up until January of 2022. The way the FDA's vaccine program is designed should help it in its efforts to expedite the full approval of COVID vaccines.

<https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/07/24/many-soldiers-still-arent-vaccinated-whats-armys-plan.html>

Thousands of soldiers are still not vaccinated against COVID-19, and Army leaders are moving to educate the unvaccinated as the deadly Delta variant sweeps through the country. Vaccine hesitancy mostly spurs from health concerns and latching onto misinformation mostly found on social media. Some soldiers have health concerns, even if experts say the research does not back up those fears.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/30/us/politics/military-vaccinations.html>

Although most of the Soldiers on Army installations are vaccinated, others have concerns and are taking advantage of a rare piece of discretion not often granted to the rank and file.

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COVID-19 Risk Communication Strategy for Required Protective Measures

Compulsory shots are standard operating procedure for the military, which requires troops to be vaccinated for at least a dozen diseases. Of the 1,336,000 Active Duty members of the military, about 64 percent are fully vaccinated, for the military, that rate is unacceptably low.

<https://www.govexec.com/workforce/2021/07/many-va-employees-apprehensive-about-vaccine-mandate-department-begins-implementation/184202/>

Many employees at the Veterans Affairs Department are voicing frustration with the COVID-19 vaccine mandate. About 70% of DOD individuals are currently vaccinated, meaning about 35,000 must now decide whether to be vaccinated or face potential consequences. VA has not specified what exactly will happen to employees who decline, saying only in a memorandum that anyone who fails to certify vaccination “may face disciplinary action up to and including removal from federal service.”

<https://news.yahoo.com/us-military-covid-vaccine-mandatory-185948954.html>

President Biden announced that federal civilian workers would be required to be vaccinated against COVID-19, yet did not extend that mandate to members of the military. The military has a complicated history around requiring active duty to be vaccinated. Biden could immediately order that members of the military be vaccinated against COVID-19, though such a move would likely create a backlash, as it did with anthrax.

<https://wjla.com/news/coronavirus-vaccine/a-rise-in-covid-19-cases-at-the-us-mexico-border>

Migrants are making their way to the United States with insufficient resources to help or process them and many of them infected with COVID-19. Concerns are rising after reports that more than 50,000 migrants have been released into the interior of the United States.

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/02/health/us-coronavirus-monday/index.html>

To avoid lockdowns, people in the United States will have to wear masks at indoor gatherings even if they are vaccinated and have kids mask up in schools. A “silver lining” of the surge in Covid-19 cases caused by the Delta variant is that more Americans appear to be at the tipping point of understanding the importance of Covid-19 vaccinations.

<https://www.kitv.com/story/44424175/honolulu-police-and-hawaii-army-national-guard-host-free-covid19-testing-in-chinatown>

The Honolulu Police Department and members of the Hawaii Army National Guard are joining in on COVID-19 testing efforts. They administered more than 40 free tests in 1 day. Guard members conduct the tests in the alleyway next to the Chinatown Substation. The swabs are courtesy of a partnership between the Hawaii Army National Guard and the Department of Health.

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COVID-19 Risk Communication Strategy for Required Protective Measures

<https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/07/30/vaccine-push-increases-dod-will-start-asking-troops-ifthey-got-shot.html>

The Defense Department is requiring all uniformed and Civilian personnel to attest to whether they have received the vaccine against COVID-19, as part of the government's effort to kick-start vaccinations. Those who have not been vaccinated will have to wear a mask and physically distance themselves from others.

<https://health.mil/News/Articles/2021/07/30/COVID19-Vaccines-Benefits-Still-Outweigh-the-Risks>

Only a small fraction of people in the military community has experienced breakthrough infections after receiving a COVID-19 vaccination - and none of them have died. Evidence shows how effective the vaccine has been and he encouraged all service members and others to get fully vaccinated.

[Immunization to protect the US Armed Forces: heritage, current practice, and prospects - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)

Americans serving with the U.S. Armed Forces need protection from the dangerous infections that they can contract during training, based on occupation, during overseas deployment, or because of underlying health status. This article consolidates content from several previous historical reviews, adds additional sources, and cites primary literature regarding military contributions and accomplishments.

<https://www.yahoo.com/news/delta-surges-u-military-braces-171232365.html>

With the Delta variant surging, the Pentagon appears poised to do something it has not so far - mandate vaccinations to safeguard against COVID-19. Half the U.S. Armed Forces are already fully vaccinated, a number that climbs when counting only Active Duty troops, excluding National Guard and reserve members. Vaccination rates are highest in the Navy, which suffered from a high-profile outbreak last year on aircraft carrier. About 73% of sailors are fully vaccinated.